



COMPANION PARROTS AND FLIGHT

Part Five: Cooperative Living with Flighted Parrots

Often, when I talk about living with flighted parrots to someone who has always clipped wings, they get a look on their face that could be interpreted as a combination of horror, perplexity, and complete consternation. You can tell that they can't even begin to wrap their minds around what that might look like, or why one would want to.



Photo by Dana McDonald

I stopped clipping wings back in the late 1990's. As I had gained more hands-on experience with birds, it just seemed to be a no-brainer that they should enjoy flight. So, I made the decision with an abundance of enthusiasm and the confidence that, "I'll just figure this out!"

I don't actually recommend this approach to those of you considering transitioning from living with a wing-clipped parrot to living with a bird who flies. It's much easier to have a bit of guidance from someone who has experience in this area. Thus, I offer this blog post to you, so that you can avoid some of the hassles that I had due to my own inexperience.

Keys to Success

The ability to live cooperatively with flighted birds depends upon three main areas of management: (1) setting up the environment effectively, (2) training yourself to be continually mindful, and (3) learning how to efficiently provide behavioral guidance. You're going to have to accept the fact that you'll be doing some training to maintain compliance.

If you don't, you *will* have an out-of-control experience with your bird and will wind up relegating him to his cage whenever you can't directly supervise. One hallmark of quality of life is the ability to make choices. That is why a flighted bird is so lucky. His ability to move around is not compromised, so he can make a lot more choices.



If allowing flight means that your bird stays in his cage for longer periods, you have accomplished nothing for his quality of life. You might as well keep clipping wings so that he can at least be out of his cage more often.

Managing the Environment

I once adopted a baby grey to a family who were so committed to allowing flight that they had remodeled their entire home to realize this first goal of having the ideal environment. All doorways were turned into arches to eliminate molding. Kitchen cabinets extended all the way down to the floor. The refrigerator fit into a recess in the wall so that no bird could perch on top of it to chew the gasket. It was quite remarkable.

You don't have to go to that extreme, of course, but a bit of work *is* needed to achieve the objective of flighted feathers and earth-bound humans living side by side in cooperative fashion.



Photo by Gloria Fantin

Birds want to perch up high and flighted parrots go where they want. They will perch on bookcases and chew the spines of the books. Many seem to have a particular fondness for lampshades. They enjoy sitting on top of doors to chew the molding.

Therefore, you will need to provide your flighted bird with his own “furnishings,” in order to keep him off of your own. The ideal environment will have a perch in every room to which your parrot has access. It is a bird’s nature to *follow the flock* and a flighted parrot will follow you from room to room. Skillful placement of hanging perches, free-standing perches and table-top perches will help to guarantee that the experience is fun for all. At the end of this post, I have included a list of perches that I know from personal experience to be attractive to parrots. Hanging perches are especially valuable. While these may seem, at first glance, inconvenient to install and maintain, they will make life so much easier. Birds naturally seek the highest place to perch. By providing perches that hang from the ceiling, your bird will be more likely to choose those instead of your own furnishings.



It is a parrot’s nature to chew where he is perched. Window ledges and the corners of walls will be at risk. Home improvement stores sell acrylic corners that can be easily screwed in place to protect these. Bannisters can be wrapped with sisal rope.

If there is enough space above your kitchen cabinets for a bird to perch, it will be best to place a piece of acrylic or wood on top that extends an inch or two past the cabinets to prevent chewing

on the tops of the doors. The same suggestion would hold true for the top of your refrigerator. It's huge fun to perch on the blades of ceiling fans and chew these. It's best to purchase a fan inside a cage – they do exist.



Electrical cords can be a hazard and replacing appliances gets to be a real drag. These can be protected either by using cord channels or black pliable irrigation tubing slit down the center and placed around the wire.

If you allow your birds to perch on your shower rod and happen to have a shower curtain, placing a second rod above the one that holds the curtain will prevent the need to replace that regularly.

If your bird never fledged or has been clipped for a few years, he might not fly much or venture into other rooms at first, causing you to think that my suggestions are somewhat over-the-top. However, as he builds his flight skills and gains confidence, he will eventually begin to explore your entire house and it will become his territory as well.

Managing the Mess

It's hard to say whether flighted birds create more mess than their clipped counterparts. Parrots are just messy – period! The answer probably depends upon where diets and enrichment items are offered and whether your bird likes to fly with his food and eat it in different locations. There *are* some actions you can take to minimize the mess.



Photo by Kris Porter

Locate hanging perches directly over cages or play stands. If that's not possible, use area rugs. Purchase two sets. I like the ones that have non-slip backing and can be washed and dried. I

haven't yet tried the Ruggable brand, but they look ideal for this purpose and look a little classier. When you need to wash the rugs currently under your perches, simply lay down your second set.

If there is a tight spot that tends to collect droppings because you can't get a rug to fit, *Glad Press and Seal* is invaluable. Having a light adhesive backing, it can be applied directly to a clean (uncarpeted) floor and then replaced when needed. For smaller messes, keeping a good quantity of small cleaning cloths and a spray bottle filled with cleaning agent is a good strategy for quick clean-ups.

Probably the best way to deal with mess is to contain it to certain areas. This will involve encouraging your bird to stay on the perches you have provided, which is covered in the section on *Managing their Behavior*.

Managing Ourselves

A friend once made me laugh by commenting that the only people who could use the remote controls in her house were the ones with long fingernails. We've all lost a remote control or three, depending upon how quickly we learn and how distracted we tend to be. We count ourselves lucky if they only take the buttons.



Parrots love electronics. Even the best among us have experienced a sneak attack on these valuables. Dr. Susan Friedman in a presentation once used a photograph of what her computer keyboard looked like after her Umbrella Cockatoo had quietly let himself out of his cage in the early hours of the morning. Of course, a clipped parrot could manage the same, but those who fly have increased access.

We have to learn to remember to cover computers with towels, put remotes away in a cupboard, keep certain doors closed, and not leave anything out in plain sight that might be attractive for chewing. This is essentially an exercise in mindfulness and the ability to anticipate problems.



We must think ahead when making purchases. For example, you might decide *not* to replace your old, worn furniture with a set of rattan. You get the idea. This is probably going to have to be a *learn by doing* experience. Be assured, the fun of living with a flighted spirit makes it worthwhile.

Managing Their Behavior

Life with parrots is always easier when we accept the fact that we must actively steer their behavior into desirable channels. When you live with birds who fly, getting into the mindset of *living as a trainer* is essential.

If you don't, your experience may very well get out of control. Parrots constantly offer behavior, as all animals do. This is especially true of birds who fly. The more active a bird can be, the more behavior he can offer, and the more opportunities he has to act on the environment. Some of this behavior, you won't like.



If you don't step up and teach him what you want him TO DO, you will wind up behaving toward him in a very aversive manner – chasing him off locations where you don't want him to be, acting like a crazy person when you find that he's destroyed your containers of expensive make-up, and using force to get him back into his cage. Besides being incredibly uncool, this type of behavior will break all trust and make having a parrot no fun at all.

Thus, you've got to teach the behaviors that will allow him to be successful and for you to have control over your experience. I will describe these briefly; information on how to teach most of these is available in abundance online.

Five Essential Behaviors to Teach and Maintain

Step-Up: The majority of birds who have been deemed good candidates for flight already step up, at least some of the time. Likely, you will just need to maintain compliance by making sure to always reinforce this with a preferred food or head scratch. A valuable practice: Ask your bird a few times a day to step up, provide a reward, and then put him right back down again. This is good advice for any parrot.

Step-Off: Birds who are strongly bonded to you may have a more difficult time with this one. If so, choose a reinforcer of high value to the parrot and show it to him when giving the cue, at least in the beginning. Reinforce *every* time you cue this behavior with a high value treat.

Stationing: Teaching your parrot to primarily use his own "furniture" is an essential practice. Three important benefits derive from this:

- It keeps him off of your shoulder, which avoids the formation of a pair bond and fosters his continuing independence.
- It helps to prevent damage to household items.
- It prevents cavity seeking behavior.

Instructions for stationing can be found [on my website](#).

The Drop: You will thank yourself a millions times over if you teach your parrot to drop an item on cue. It saves a lot of money in replacing pens and will keep him safe if he ever picks up anything dangerous.

Offer him an item to take with his beak, such as a poker chip or whiffle ball. Once he takes it, show him a food treat or something else he might want more and ask him to "Drop." Once he has, give him the other item. Practice this often with a variety of things, gradually working up to those that are more valuable to him.



Photo courtesy of Chris Shank

The Recall: Teaching your bird to come when called is a must. Having a rock-solid recall is essential to a happy relationship and drastically increases your chances of getting him back if he is lost. This can be taught a couple of different ways. My favorite: If he has a habit of flying to your shoulder, turn when you hear him coming and say “Fly here” while holding up your hand so that he lands there. Reward him with a treat. As he learns that “Fly here” means to come and land on your hand, you can begin to cue him from a variety of different locations. Following these simple suggestions will go a long way toward ensuring that you establish a happy and cooperative existence with your parrot.

One final suggestion: If you have never lived with a flighted parrot or currently have challenges with your bird who flies, please either call me for a consultation or get help from another qualified mentor. As Dr. Patricia McConnell once wrote about dog training: “You wouldn’t try to learn basketball just by reading a book, so if you need to play the game, do what any parent would do for their child, and find a good, knowledgeable coach.”

Resources for Perches

- The AviHang and AviStation from [My Birdie Buddy](#)
- Oddball Perches and Crawlers from [Oliver’s Garden](#)
- Planets from [Parrot Planet Paradise](#)
- The Get A Grip Climbing Nets from [StarBird Parrot](#)
- Bungees from [Super Bird Creations](#)
- Window Seats and playstands from [Wingdow](#)

Sneak Preview

My friend, Chris Shank, and I often discuss parrots and their welfare. We share some serious concerns about both how baby parrots are hand-raised in captivity and the recent insistence among free-flight enthusiasts that candidates must be hand-reared and encouraged to develop a bond of dependence in order to be successful.



Chris has free flown her cockatoos for over 30 years and is an expert on the subject. Several years ago, two Bare-eyed Cockatoos were raised here by their parents and became successful free fliers through positive reinforcement training.

This spring, two parent-raised Bare-eyed Cockatoos have gone to nest and are currently sitting on eggs. Therefore, their offspring will be second-generation parent-reared birds and will become free flyers themselves. *Chris will be revealing her experiences here as a guest blogger so that you all can share in this fascinating and exciting experience.* We hope to show that hand-rearing is not necessary to have a trusting relationship with a young parrot and that a young parrot raised to be independent *can* succeed at free flight.

Please note that neither Chris nor I advocate free flight for the average owner, especially the flight of a single parrot.

Thank you for reading my blog. I am Pamela Clark, an IAABC Certified Parrot Behavior Consultant. My passion is helping people with parrots by offering behavior consultations and publishing information you can trust. To access free resources or subscribe to my newsletter (which is a different publication from this blog), please visit me at <http://www.pamelaclarkonline.com>. Until next time!